

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine

Peter Grain, Sr.
c. 1786-?

The temple facade so characteristic of the Greek Revival style first appeared in New England on Alexander Parris's St. Paul's Church of 1819 in Boston. Within a decade Portland received its first temple fronted building, the granite Custom House at Fore and Pearl Streets. Planned in 1828 by an unknown designer, it was erected the following year with a stone portico of four Doric columns each measuring three feet in diameter and eighteen feet high.

As the 1830s began in Portland, another major Greek Revival structure was built, the Portland Theater on Free Street (Figure 1). Constructed of brick with wood and granite trim, the Theater featured a handsome classical facade. The following late nineteenth century description provides an excellent picture of the building:

It had a hip roof, the more common style in those days for large buildings. The front was quite imposing, having a recess with two large columns of the Ionic order supporting the heavy entablature which extended across the end, the cornice only, running along the sides. There was, probably, a heavy balustrade above the cornice to give loftiness to the front, which would otherwise look flat, there being no gable to the roof.

The theater stood back several feet from the street line, a broad flight of steps leading up to the floor of the portico, from which entrance was had to the vestibule by three doorways. There were also doors leading to the basement upon each side of the stairs, one of which a sign is said to have designated "The way to the pit."

The outer walls show that two rows of window openings have been closed up, six in each row, while upon the inside, where the walls can be seen for several feet, from the top down as far as the present ceiling, there is no evidence of filling except at the three rear windows, so the others must have been simply blind windows, or panels in the outer walls. There were four chimneys, one at either corner, a few feet from the ends.¹

Little is known of who financed the \$10,000 construction cost of the Portland Theater. However, the name of the architect, Peter Grain, is recorded in newspaper accounts of the theater's opening.² Grain was a versatile artist whose repertoire included portrait, miniature, landscape, and scenery painting.³ Born in France about 1786, he came to America before 1815. His eldest child, Peter Grain, Jr., was born in Maryland about that year. In 1822 Grain advertised in Richmond, Virginia as a miniature painter and drawing master, and in 1823-24 he was at Charleston, South Carolina. His eldest daughter Caroline was born in England about 1825, followed by Ellen a year later in New York. While there he designed the Lafayette Theater, which was built in

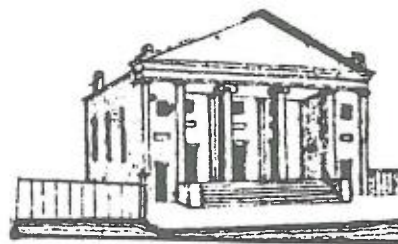


Figure 1. Portland Theater, 1830, as altered into the Free Street Baptist Church. Detail from a Map of the City of Portland, 1836, by John Cullum (Courtesy Maine Historical Society, Portland).

1827.⁴ In 1829 and 1830 he was in Boston, where his second son, George, was born.

While in Boston Peter Grain became involved in the design and construction of the Portland Theater. Four days before the theater opened on September 28, 1830, the *Eastern Argus* carried the following descriptive advertisement:

New Theater at head of Free St. will be completed and open soon.

The Building has been erected and completed entirely under the direction of PETER GRAIN, Esq.

The Audience part of the interior, is a character chaste in its design, and harmonious in its effect, together with the Scenic Department, which is complete in all its various branches, is the entire work of Mr. P. Grain.

The Stage is large and commodious, and of sufficient extent for all the productions of the modern Drama.

Grain went from Boston to New York in 1831, where he stayed through 1836. He visited Charleston again in 1837-38, returning to New York that year. Another Charleston trip took place in 1849-50. By August, 1850, he was settled in Philadelphia with his family, where he resided at least until 1853.

While our knowledge of Peter Grain's active career ends at this point, the Portland Theater is still with us in an altered form. Within five years of its inception, the theater failed. In December, 1835, eight members of the Federal Street Church purchased the building for \$5,000 in anticipation of the formation of a new Baptist society in the western section of the city. The Free Street Baptist Church was formed the next month, and by August, 1836, the former theater had been converted into a house of worship. The only exterior alterations were "the making of a gabled roof by its extension at the ends, putting three



Figure 2. Free Street Baptist Church as remodelled 1836. Sketch by John Calvin Stevens, February, 1887 (MHPC).

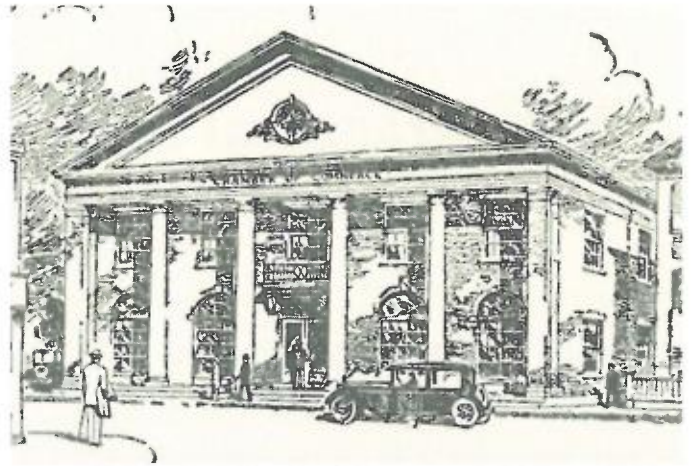


Figure 3. The Portland Chamber of Commerce, 1926. Sketch by John Calvin Stevens and John Howard Stevens (MHPC).

long windows in each side in place of the smaller ones, and carrying the entablature along the sides. The interior of course received radical changes.”⁵

Peter Grain’s Greek Revival facade remained for the next two decades. During the summer of 1856, the building was extensively remodelled under the direction of the Boston architect Richard Bond.⁶ Grain’s Ionic columns gave way to a massive brick Italianate front which was flanked on either side by a tower. The wooden spire on the right tower rose 185 feet above Congress Square. Storm damage resulted in its removal in 1876.

After serving 50 more years as a church, the building was remodelled once again in 1926 to become the Portland Chamber of Commerce, its present function.⁷ Architects John Calvin Stevens and John Howard Stevens replaced Bond’s Victorian facade with a four column Colonial Revival one. Interestingly, nearly 40 years before, the elder Stevens had provided the Free Street Baptists with a sketch of the building as it had looked in 1836 for the frontispiece of their 50th anniversary publication (Figure 2). Stevens had based his drawing on an engraving which appears on John Cullum’s 1836 map of Portland. Thus, the architects were aware of the earlier appearance of the church and clearly drew upon it in making their own design. Grain’s corner pilasters are evoked in the square brick pillar at either end of the portico, and his cornice lines are echoed above the colonnade (Figure 3). While by no means a

reproduction of Peter Grain’s Greek Revival facade, the Stevens’ design successfully recaptured the spirit of the original and returned its long vanished classical presence to Portland.

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.
December, 1984

NOTES

- ¹ *The Semi-Centennial Anniversary of the Free Street Baptist Church, Portland*: Brown Thurston & Company, 1887, pp. 74-75.
- ² *Eastern Argus*, September 24, 1830; September 28, 1830; October 1, 1830.
- ³ George C. Groce and David H. Wallace, *The New York Historical Society’s Dictionary of Artists in America 1564-1860*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966, pp. 269-270. All biographical information about Grain comes from this source except for the reference to his design of Lafayette Theater in New York.
- ⁴ Jacob Landy, *The Architecture of Minard Lafever*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970, p. 50.
- ⁵ *Semi-Centennial Anniversary...*, p. 75.
- ⁶ *Portland Advertiser*, July 24, 1856.
- ⁷ Writers’ Program, Work Projects Administration, *Portland City Guide*, Portland: Forest City Printing Company, 1940, p. 235.

List of Known Commissions in Maine by Peter Grain, Sr.

Portland Theater, Portland, 1830, Altered.